STRATEGIES

Tips to Make Your Traveling Easier



Can You Take It with You?

Carry-on questions and customs conundrums

LIM GIAR

Airline folklore is rife with tales of unlikely things that passengers have tried to bring into the cabin as carry-on luggage. Would you believe a large wedding cake? The drive shaft from a BMW? How about a corpse in a duffel bag?

Airlines, of course, have rules about the number and kinds of things you can carry on. Many are getting tougher as flight departures are delayed by late arrivals who insist on searching every overhead bin for a place to stash their oversize bags, and planes go out fuller than ever. Most airlines now have "sizer boxes" at the gate, which serve as a reminder to check bags that don't fit. British Airways recently started enforcing a rule of one carry-on per passenger in coach. At Delta, "we've really gotten serious about our carryon policy," an official says.

On major domestic airlines, your ticket usually entitles you to take along three pieces of luggage at no extra charge, no more than two of which may be carried on board-provided they fit in the overhead bin or under your seat. But passenger confusion about the rules is compounded by two factors: First, regulations (or their enforcement) can be inconsistent. Airlines occasionally relax the carry-on allowance to three pieces-or tighten it to just one-depending on how full the flight is.

Second, individual airlines have varying policies about

what counts toward your carry-on allotment and what doesn't. For example, there's lots of ambiguity about laptop computers and briefcases. (Not surprisingly, one of the hottest-selling travel items these days is a bag that serves as a computer case/briefcase.) Things that generally don't count include purses, overcoats, umbrellas, fanny packs (as long as they're small and wearable), cameras (unless they're in an over-the-shoulder camera bag), reading material, and medical-related items like crutches. Another general exception is a bag for "infant necessities," as American describes to

How big can carry-on items be? Most airlines say that the total dimensions (length plus width plus depth) cannot exceed 45 inches; and the weight of any piece, checked or carried on, cannot top 70 pounds. In addition to the overhead bins and the space under the seats, most planes have at least one storage closet—generally in the first-class cabin—where flight attendants will sometimes let even coach passengers stow an unwieldy item. However, travelers should never assume that this will be allowed. A large musical instrument, such as a gu tar in a case, might go in the storage closet (American says instruments can come aboard as carry-ons if they don't exceed 39 inches in length). A collapsible

stroller that doesn't fit in the overheads might end up there, although most airlines say their official policy for strollers is to "gate-check" them (that is, the crew will take them from you at the gate, check them in the baggage compartment, and return them to you at the arrival gate).

Some passengers may think they have a right to lug on as much as they want, but if the gate agent or flight crew tells them they must check a bag, they'd be well advised to comply without argument: another thing airlines are getting to annuabout these days is unruly and disruptive passengers.



customs: l'affaire s

On a layover at Frankfurt Airport, Clifford Pearson decided to pick up a foot-long pepper-crusted salami to take home. He bought the salami in a secured area surrounded by duty-free shops. On his arrival back at New York's JFK Airport, Department of Agriculture officials promptly seized his sausage.

Pearson was angry with the Frankfurt Airport purveyors: "They shouldn't sell goods that travelers can't take home with them." An American customs officer told him the agency had repeatedly advised the shop owners that the suspect sausages were being confiscated, but the advisories were ignored.

"It's all very well to blame us," says Robert Payne, a spokesman for Frankfurt Airport, "but U.S. Customs should inform people, when they're leaving, what they can and cannot bring back."

Mary Benzie agrees. "Check with us first," says the director of passenger clearance at the Department of Agriculture. Foreign airports are outside her authority and under no obligation to post warnings for uninformed shoppers. She suggests that travelers con-

tact customs and agriculture departments before they go, because the list of do's and don'ts is long. For instance, German sausages are a no-no, but Irish sausages pose no problem. Nuts are okay as long as they're not from Asia or parts of Africa; fruit is never a good idea.

Though a sausage seizure may be a nuisance, it doesn't represent a major financial setback. The impounding of expensive, exotic souvenirs will hurt more. Items made from endangered wildlife, including ivory, leopard skin, coral, and tortoiseshell, are all prohibited. You could even end up paying a fine for acquiring gifts your family and friends will never see.

Travelers can get information before their trip from local branches of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service and Plant Protection and Quarantine Unit, by calling a central hot line (301/734-8645), or by checking out the Web page at www.aphis.usda.gov. Travelers can also call the U.S. Customs Service (800/697-3662) or go to the agency's Web page at www.customs.ustreas.gov. American consulates abroad may also be helpful.

—Lia Mackey

RIDDLE: When Bob asked Alice to marry him, she said yes---on one condition. He had to promise to take her on a whirlwind tour of Holland, Italy, Turkey, and China. Bob, a penny-pincher, agreed. He knew he could keep his promise without even leaving their home state. Where do they live? (TURN PAGE FOR ANSWER.)